

No petty politics at the homeless's expense

Gatineau, May 2, 2005

Mr. Joe Fontana
Federal Minister of Labour and Housing
And Minister responsible for Homelessness

Dear Minister Fontana,

Last week, you publicly associated the continuation and ongoing funding of the “Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative” (SCPI), Canada’s Homelessness Program, with the re-election of your government, urging community groups working in the area to work towards that goal.

We feel that this statement you made at the meeting with the *Réseau solidarité itinérance du Québec*, held on Wednesday, April 27, and during several media scrums, the same day and the day after, in Quebec City and in Montreal, are both unacceptable and unworthy of you as a member of the Parliament. Community groups working with homeless people and those at risk of homelessness must meet needs. Their duty is not to promote political programs, nor is it to ally with a specific party.

The SCPI is an exemplary program created in 1999 by your government following harsh criticisms released the year before by the United Nations’ (UN) Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Committee was then very concerned that a country as rich as Canada had let the homelessness and inadequate housing issues become a national crisis. Since it was implemented, SCPI was cited by the UN as an exemplary program that ensured the improvement of the living conditions of thousands of homeless people as well as the prevention and alleviation of homelessness Quebec and Canada-wide.

In compliance with every Canadian province’s jurisdiction, SCPI allows each local community to identify their specific needs as well as the projects that should be funded through an administrative and political interference-free process.

A year ago, during the campaign, your government, taking pride in the program, pledged to ensure the continuation and the quick development of SCPI to maintain and improve existing services. In fact, that very promise was reiterated in the most recent Speech from the Throne.

Unfortunately, Minister Goodale’s budget tabled on February, 23 didn’t comply with your promises since no new monies were committed to this effect. This constitutes a serious threat to the sustainability and consolidation of existing services because your government’s financial commitments concerning funding for the Phase 2 come to an end in less than a year, March, 31, 2006, and no other realistic concrete financial alternative was offered to the funded agencies that created services for the homeless.

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- 2 -

From that perspective, it is growing evident that a vast majority of funded agencies, to their great despair, will unfortunately have to significantly reduce services offered or even worse, will be forced to close down after the cut-off date because they simply won’t have the

financial resources to maintain the services even though everybody agrees that we should in fact increase the service offering.

Not only did your government promise to announce the funding of SCPI, your government had the obligation and the power to do so long before the present political crisis. And you're now urging us to support your government and the New Democratic Party so the funding materializes? It's outrageous, as was your statement, last week, in Montreal and Quebec City, when you announced once again the development of projects already disclosed by Ministers and liberal MP's during last year's campaign.

Homeless people became bargaining assets just like the repeatedly announced development of highway sections. The program is tainted by this kind of low-down politics. Homeless people would rather have real services.

You recently disclosed new measures (reducing mortgage insurance premiums, rent subsidy), and we feel that it is just as urgent that your government keeps its promises and quickly puts forward – before the next elections – an alternative to ensure the continuation and the adequate funding of SCPI Program so people affected don't suffer the loss of services. We think that you will agree with us that such a situation would be inadmissible in a society as rich as ours.

Looking forward to a prompt response.

Members of the Executive Committee of Réseau solidarité itinérance du Québec

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